

John 10 Bandit Shepherds and Gated Communities

I confess that although I have studied this particular passage from John's gospel before, especially in connection with the 23rd Psalm with which it is paired, there were two things which I have previously overlooked that jumped out at me this week and pretty much demanded to be considered. Just who are Bandit Shepherds and thieves Jesus is talking about? And at the end, the sheep are described as both coming in and going out as they respond to the voice of their shepherd; they are not just gathered into the safety of a sheepfold, but are led out into the world. John's gospel contains the least descriptive indicators of location and audience of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life. It is more concerned with what are called the "I am" statements. This is one of those passages. The first verse in this passage has Jesus addressing a diverse group which has been following him. Chapter 7 is the last clear indication of just where Jesus is. He has gone to Jerusalem for the Festival of Booths where people debate whether or not he is the Messiah. There are Pharisees among the crowd who unsuccessfully try to have him arrested. At the end of chapter 8 Jesus leaves the Temple and is walking along when he and the disciples pass a blind man. The blind man doesn't request anything of Jesus, but Jesus heals him. This is another sore point for the Pharisees who investigate the healing and we encounter the concept of physical and spiritual blindness. Then chapter 10 begins a discourse in which Jesus speaking about sheep and shepherds is describing himself as the Good Shepherd who is both the shepherd and the gate of the sheepfold. The usual visual image from this passage is usually conflated with that of the shepherd who leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one lost sheep. Almost every Sunday school room has a picture depicting Jesus with a small lamb across his shoulders. This image usually converges around the concept of how Jesus as our Good Shepherd seeks and provides for us within the safety of his gathered flock. This resonates especially well with the 23rd Psalm. In terms of the 23rd Psalm, bandits and thieves then represent the enemy before whom a table is prepared for us. Here it seems that Jesus is comparing us to sheep and also giving out a warning about these folks who are bandit shepherds and thieves. Those who only come to steal and destroy. Are we truly like sheep? Then who are the bandit shepherds and thieves we are warned against? Jesus tells us that he came to give life and give it abundantly, but do we understand what Jesus means by abundant life? I am sure that many of those to whom Jesus spoke would have had more knowledge of sheep and their behaviors than most of us reading that passage today. Most of my thoughts of sheep are really about lambs, tiny, cuddly and pure white. Adults don't usually look so pretty. I must admit that my images of adult sheep are gathered from some old western movies my dad liked to watch. So I did some research about sheep and their behaviors. That led to the discovery that all that white soft wool has to undergo a lot of cleaning and untangling to get that way. It seems that adult sheep are filthy animals covered in mud and all sort of nasty things. Evidently modern shepherds use Woolite on them before shearing to clean and untangle it. A West Texas Shepherd named Ed Winton describes sheep this way: "Sheep are just born looking for a way to die." It seems they like to get themselves into precarious places and are too stubborn or stupid to just turn around. The stupid part fits with the image gained from Dad's westerns. Surprisingly enough, what I also did not know was that sheep do know the voice of their shepherd. But what I also learned was that is not their

first inclination. Sheep as herd animals are hard-wired to follow the sheep in front of them. They follow other sheep far better than they follow a shepherd. Sheep do know the voice of the shepherd, but will only *sometimes* follow him or her. Sometimes, however, sheep will follow a stranger—especially sheep who do not yet know the shepherd well. It takes time for a shepherd to know sheep well enough to tell them apart. Sheep apparently see us the same way in many cases. Evidently something else that contributes to this recognition difficulty is that sheep have poor vision—especially poor depth vision so they have a hard time seeing drop offs or finding a partially open gate along a fence line. Unless a gate is broad and wide open, they need a shepherd to lead a couple of sheep through before they can go out. As I investigated what is written about sheep and their behavior, I found that Jesus’ metaphor comparing us to sheep is more accurate and less flattering than I would like. We are dirty sheep—sinful folk. Our very being—selfish that it is—gets tangled in all sorts of undesirable things—things that we don’t seem to notice because like the sheep don’t notice the nasty things on their wool, our sin slowly clumps together. That which is outside, however, does not corrupt what is inside. Dirty sheep are still incredibly valuable to their owners. So we are to God. Like sheep we involve ourselves in all sorts of self-destructive behavior that we cannot escape on our own. It takes time and attention for the shepherd to know his sheep. We can take comfort in the fact that God has taken that time and gives us that attention. Jesus says he knows his sheep by name. But although we know who the Good Shepherd is, sometimes like sheep we fail to follow him and instead follow the voice of a stranger. Of course, we, like sheep, have been led astray by thieves and bandits who intend to do us harm. It is important to remember this about sheep as well. The more time the sheep spend with the shepherd, the easier it is to identify his distinct voice. The more time we spend with Jesus’ teachings, the less likely we are to follow someone else. So we can recognize how we are like the sheep in the metaphor and appreciate that God has come to us to protect us, but who are the thieves and bandits of today that Jesus would warn us against? For the early church, the view was that it was those who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Later the Roman Catholic Church thought it was those leading the Reformation. Of course those within the Reformation viewed the Catholic Church as the Shepherd Bandit. There is always the human tendency to denounce the “other” as enemy or in this case, the thief or bandit. But it occurs to me that the designation might be more accurately applied to those whose voices gain our attention and support who voice things contrary to what Jesus taught. That is why we need to remember what the voice of Jesus we have from Scripture tells us about where he would lead us. It is helpful to carry this understanding of sheep further in the metaphor Jesus uses: “So again, Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who come before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.’” Yes, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Abundant life is found through him, but for whatever reason we, like sheep seem to have a difficult time recognizing the gate when it is right in front of us! We need the Good Shepherd to lead us, we need to hear and learn where he would have us go. What does it mean for us as followers of Jesus today, in our context, to be protected by the gate and the shepherd, to be “saved” to have life in abundance? It is important to notice that the metaphor of the gate is not one of exclusion, not a license to think of ourselves as Jesus’ true sheep and others as outsiders. The purpose of the gate is not to keep out other sheep. Jesus says in verse

16: I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” The true purpose of the gate is to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep—the thieves, bandits and wolves. It goes without saying that there are many thieves and bandits in our world who seek to steal and kill and destroy. There are also wolves in sheep’s, or shepherd’s clothing. For example there are preachers who proclaim the abundant life that Jesus offers as a life of continual health, wealth and success. This message often leads to much wealth for the one proclaiming this view, but deception and despair for those who follow and find that life is still full of struggle. John’s gospel describes the abundant life as life in Christ, and not just about life after death. It is life that begins here and now. It is knowing that God so loved the world—the world, not just our part of it—that Jesus came to live among us so we would know of God’s eternal love for the world. It is life in community, finding security and nourishment as part of his flock. It is life that abounds in meaning and value and endures even beyond death. But like I overlooked the bandits, I also failed to appreciate that the Good Shepherd not only led the sheep into the fold for their protection, he led them out again. Jesus leads the sheep out. The sheep fold is not a gated community which is all about keeping people safely inside. The point of them is to be on the inside with those others who have been properly vetted—not gathering together to be sent out into the unknown. Jesus as the Good Shepherd is about equipping his fold to go out into the world as he leads them; as they follow his voice which says they will be known as those who love—even their enemies; that they will care for the neighbor even the one who they do not like—caring for those who are hungry and thirsty—and the voice goes on. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen